



Confession of Faith:

Article 36

The reason that there is a government is not so flattering; it is because of our depravity. We cannot do without government.

The Lord has given to government the sword, the power for the punishment of evil-doers and for the praise of them that do well. It is also their duty to protect the sacred ministry and thus remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship.

We might ask, what does it mean to "*remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship*"? It sounds so theoretical, so impossible. Is this article still relevant? Is it still applicable today? How can this be applied to our present situation? You understand this is quite a controversial article.

How must that be done today? In order to answer that question we should first try to define what the magistrates are, what the government is before God, and what the Lord calls them. In God's Word they are called by different names:

- a. *Kings*. Isaiah 49:23, where all government can be referred to by the name of kings.
- b. *Princes*. Isaiah 1:23, "*The princes are rebellious.*"
- c. *Elders*. Exodus 24:9, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders were the magistrates at that time.
- d. *Judges*. Isaiah 1:26, "*And I will restore thy judges,*" that is, thy government, thy magistrates, and thy counsellors.
- e. *The shields of the earth*. Psalm 47:9, "*The princes of the people are gathered together, even the people of the God of Abraham: for the shields of the earth (the government) belong unto God: He is greatly exalted.*"
- f. *Gods*. Psalm 82:6, "*I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the Most High.*"

Especially this last name indicates that the magistrates have a very high position according to Scripture.

We read in Romans 13 that the government is considered to be the servant of God, the minister of God. God's servants are ministers, but we also could say that in God's eyes the president of a country is His minister. The government is the minister of God. That is a very lofty, a very honorable title. The higher powers are of God, and they are ordained of God; and whosoever resisteth that power resisteth the ordinance of God. So a government is not a manmade institution, but it is ordained, it is appointed by God; it is an ordinance of God. Those rulers are a terror to the evil; they are not a terror to good works. The government "*is the minister of God to thee for good*" (verse 4), and "*he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*" So the government is a servant of God, a minister of God.

Why did our fathers believe that the government had a task also in regard to error, to destroy the kingdom of the anti-Christ and to promote the kingdom of Christ?

This article is based on Scripture. It is not in conflict with our presbyterial church government; it does not intrude into the spiritual rights of the church or give the government the right to do so. However,

this article does not acknowledge a neutral state. It does not recognize a government whose calling would be to give equal rights of protection to truth and lie, and equal rights to idolatry and to the true service of God.

We all know that "equal rights" is a term we read every day. We may not discriminate. It sounds like a kind of blasphemy to say that there are not equal rights for everything. But I would say this is just the basis of the battle that is going on today in this country and all over the world. According to some, there must be equal rights for everything: for all persuasions, for all opinions, for freedom of expression to its fullest extent, whatever filth and horrible things there may be, in art, in print, or in the spoken word. Freedom of expression, equal rights, protection for truth and lie — it is up to the person whether he chooses this or that, but it is not the task of the government.

The question is: Does the government have the task to determine what is true and what is a lie, and to protect the truth and prevent both the promotion of the lie and the spread of false religion? Must the government protect the true church, and suppress and, if possible, destroy the dominion of the kingdom of the anti-Christ?

To our fathers this was not just an academic question, but they saw it as a very essential thing. Now we live in a society which always speaks about equal rights, about freedom of expression, liberty and justice for all. But what do we then mean by that liberty? Should the government stay out of anything which concerns religion or philosophy and only take care that nothing will disturb others, so that there is room for anything, whatever it may be? Should everyone's lifestyle be considered okay, as long as it does not harm others? Should each be free to express and practice his own sexual preferences, with no restriction to this expression? Should we do what feels good, and as long as it is with mutual consent, it is all fine? Instead of the infallible rules of God's Word, should the corrupt desires of the human heart be the norm for what is bad or good? How very dangerous it is to go that way, in the path of this secular humanism which is so prevalent in our days in the government, society, and schools. Therefore we now live in a country where spiritual poison, immorality, blasphemy, dishonoring God, and undermining His law in marriage, family, and church, are allowed or even promoted and protected by our government.

God's Word says that the government is the minister of God. That already should teach us something. A minister, a servant, should not do what the people tell him to do, but what his Master tells him. God's Word tells us the Master of the magistrate is God. They are accountable unto Him, as I am, and as you as parents are, and as is anyone who has some position of authority or some responsibility. We are responsible, and so is the government.

Calvin wrote to the king of Navarra in 1563 that it is the office of the government to take care that God would be served rightly. Our fathers have stated in the first Helvetic Confession, Article 26, *"It is the task of the government to protect and promote the true honor of God and true religion, with punishment and removal of all that blasphemes God."*

The second Helvetic Confession says in Article 30, *"The government must use the sword of God against criminals, revolutionaries, blasphemers. They must also punish the uncorrectable heretics who continue to blaspheme the majesty of God and disturb and pollute the church of God."*

The *Confessio Gallicana* says in Article 36, *"The government must use the civil sword to subdue all rebellious ones, evil-doers, and those who promote false religion."*

The *Confessio Scoticana* in 1560 stated in Article 34, *"The governments are appointed to the protection of religion in order that they may suppress all idolatry and superstition in their territory, as we see in David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Josiah, and other kings."*

The Synod of Dordt, in 1618/1619 in its 177th session, said that the government should remove the Roman Catholic priests from their official services. That was quite a strong statement.

The Westminster Confession in 1648 said, *"It is the duty of the government that all blasphemy and heresies should be removed."*

So we could go on. Rev. De Cock, one of the leaders of the secession from the State Church, said openly in 1834, "*God's Word demands that the government may not permit equal protection of lie and truth, but must seek to cast down the power of anti-Christ and must promote the kingdom of Christ.*"

From where does the idea of equal rights come? During the French Revolution, in 1795, the theme was "*Liberty, equality, fraternity.*" Those three words were essential to the men of the revolution. They wanted liberty for everything. They also very much insisted that the church should stay out of anything that was government business, and that the government should have nothing to say about any kind of religion, but leave it up to the people themselves. The French Revolution really promoted the idea that there is an area in which God has nothing to say. That area is the government. The government is accountable only to the people, but not to God. But what does God's Word say in Proverbs 8:15? "*By Me kings reign, and princes decree justice.*" And Romans 13:1 states, "*Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God.*"

What is the task of the government in regard to the church? For this our fathers said, "*The government has a right **circa sacra**, but not **in sacra**.*" This means the government has a task concerning the church, not *in* the church. They may not interfere in church matters.

In the past the government often abused its authority and its task, and they began to meddle in church business. They wanted to have some say in the election and calling of ministers. In the time of the Arminian controversy the magistrates protected and promoted the Remonstrants and chose their side. They even began to oppress those who were truly Reformed.

Indeed, the government has often abused its power and should not have power *in sacra*. The church should decide what is or is not error, but the government must support the church; it must make society peaceful and promote the spreading of the gospel.

Groen van Prinsterer gave a few examples of how the government could do this. He said it should promote the gospel preaching. The government should make a declaration requesting the churches to have a prayer day. It should appoint chaplains or ministers for the army and navy. It should promote and support Christian education. They should punish the misuse of God's name and the desecration of God's day. The government should acknowledge God by calling upon His name officially at the opening and closing of their meetings. It should support and assist the church. It should try to root out all that threatens the prosperity of the church. The government should be as a wall around the church, not a prison wall, but a protecting wall. It should make the conditions for gospel preaching as favorable as it can. The government should try to root out all that threatens the church of God.

It is clear that our fathers, when speaking about the kingdom of the antichrist, meant the Roman Catholic church at that time. Our fathers also were very much opposed to the teachings of the Anabaptists. Calvin, who labored in Geneva and became influential as a leader of the Protestant churches, also believed that the government had to punish heretics. Sometimes, in extreme cases, this was literally done with the sword. Our fathers have always maintained that there must be freedom of conscience, that the destruction of the kingdom of the antichrist is not what Emperor Charlemagne did by forcing the people to become Christians. But they said that as soon as people worship publicly and bring their worship on the street and promote their unscriptural ideas publicly, then the government has a task to restrain it, and, if possible, to prevent it. In that respect our fathers did not believe in complete freedom of expression. They believed in freedom of conscience, but not in equal rights.

We believe that as a father is in his family, and ministers and elders are in the church, so the government also has to be a father. It should be a loving father. If a father were to give complete freedom to his children, would he be a loving father? Would he seek the welfare of his family? Would a government which understands it is responsible to God give freedom to shedding of blood, to promoting blasphemy and public mockery, because there should be freedom of expression or equal rights?

There must be freedom of conscience, but there may not be an unrestricted and unlimited permissiveness toward all kinds of wickedness and errors which grieve God. We are not like Israel of the Old Testament, which was a theocracy. But yet we believe that as the kings were responsible to God in the Old Testament, so the government is still responsible to God today, because, as Paul says, it is the minister of God to them for good. And woe to the government, and to the fathers in the families, and to the ministers and elders in the churches, and to anyone who has authority, if he does not use his authority to promote the honor of God and, if possible, to destroy that which dishonors God. That was the opinion of our fathers.

The teachings of our Confession and of our fathers can be summarized as follows:

1. The civil government has a task and obligation in regard to both tables of the law.
2. In regard to the first table, this task has a positive and a negative side.
3. The positive side is the obligation to protect the sacred ministry of the church.
4. The negative aspect is the obligation to break down the kingdom of the antichrist and everything which supports that kingdom.
5. The positive task to protect the holy ministry does not include or imply any involvement of the government in the internal matters of the church. The sovereignty of the church as well as of the state may not be violated.
6. The negative aspect is that the actions of the state are to be restricted to sinful public matters. Personal freedom of conscience is essential and may not be violated.
7. The civil state has the right and the calling to use the sword for these public transgressions, but it must do this with wisdom and when it is most fitting according to the circumstances.
8. The extreme punishment must be given only in cases of stubborn, continued resistance against the church and in cases of assaults to destroy the true religion. Then, if there is no other way, the government has to use the sword.

In regard to the government, we have to reject the errors of the Anabaptists, who opposed the government as something of the world and of the devil, and said, "*We believers, we are the kingdom of God.*" They went to Munster and founded a new theocracy, a new kingdom of God. This was a disaster and became an open dishonor to God.

Our duties in regard to the government are:

- a. *Subjection.* Christ says, "*Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's.*" We are to honor and respect the government. We have to obey them except in cases where they demand things which are contrary to God's law. Then we have to obey God rather than men.

We read in Proverbs 24:21, "My son, fear thou the Lord and the king: and meddle not with them that are given to change." Also the apostle speaks of it in 1 Peter 2:17: "Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king."

- b. *Earnest prayer for them.* In Jeremiah 29:7 we read, "*And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it (even if it is the oppressor): for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace.*" And the apostle says in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, "*I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions and giving of thanks be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*" May the Lord give us much prayer for those who are placed in positions of authority, also for our government.

Indeed, there are many reasons to be very concerned about the direction in which the government tries to lead the nation. Sadness and grief should fill our hearts because of the sins of nation and church.

May we humble ourselves before the King of kings. We read in Joel 2:17, *"Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them: wherefore should they say among the people, Where is their God?"*

May the Lord give such intercessors for government and nation, bowing in true humiliation before Him. Then there would be hope for us and our children.

C Vogelaar

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